

LUTHER ON TRANSLATION.

TRANSLATED BY W. H. CARRUTH.

[This little leaflet appeared in the form of a letter, *Ein Sendbrief vom Dolmetschen*, published by Luther's friend Link in Nuremberg. It undertakes to reply to two questions, the first regarding his translation of Romans iii. 28, the second touching the intercession of the saints. It is only the first of these which will interest modern readers, giving, as it does, not only some account of the pains taken by Luther and his fellow-workers to render the Bible into idiomatic German, but also certain keen observations on the spirit of the language and on the true function of a translator.—W. H. C.]

GRACE and peace in Christ! Honorable, prudent and dear sir and friend: I have received your letter with the two interrogations or questions on which you desire my reply: first, why, in the third chapter of the Epistle to the Romans, I translated the words of St. Paul, *Arbitramur, hominem justificari ex fide absque operibus*, thus: "We hold that man is justified by faith alone, apart from the works of the law." And you inform me therewith how the Papists are wasting much vain talk over the fact that the word *sola*, "alone," is not found in the text of St. Paul, and that such an addition to the word of God is not to be tolerated from me, etc. And second, whether the departed saints pray for us, since we read that the angels in heaven pray for us, etc.

To the first question you may answer to your Papists on my behalf, if you please, as follows: First, that if I, Dr. Luther, could have foreseen that the Papists taken all together were able to translate well and correctly one chapter of the Scripture, I should have shown due humility and should have asked them for aid and help to translate the New Testament. But since I knew and have clear proof that not one of them knows rightly how to translate or to speak German, I relieved them and myself of that trouble. But this is to be noted, that from my translation and my German they are learning to talk and write German and are thus stealing my language, of which they knew little before, though they do not thank me, but they rather use it against me. But I do not begrudge it to

them, for it flatters me that I have taught these my ungrateful disciples and enemies how to talk.

Secondly, you may say that I have translated the New Testament to the best of my ability and upon my conscience. But I have not thereby forced anyone to read it, but left that free, and have done it merely as a service to those who can do no better. No one is prevented from making a better one. Whoever will not read it may let it alone. I beg and urge no one to read it. It is *my* Testament and *my* translation and shall be and remain mine. If I have made mistakes in it (whereof I am not conscious, and would not deliberately have translated incorrectly a single letter of it) I will not suffer the Papists to be the judges in the matter. For they have as yet too long ears for this office and their bray is too weak to judge of my translation.

I know well—but they know less than the miller's beast—what knowledge, industry, reason and understanding are necessary for a good translator, for they have never tried it. It is an old saying: The roadbuilder shall have many masters. So it fares with me also. Those who have never been able to talk rightly, not to mention translating, are all my masters and I must be their disciple. And if I had asked them how to translate the first two words of Matthew i, 1, *Liber generationis*, not one of them could have said 'Cudahcut' in response, and yet they now criticize my whole work, the courteous fellows! St. Jerome had the same experience when he translated the Bible: the whole world was his master then and he was the only one who knew nothing, and the good man was condemned by those who were not fit to black his shoes. Hence it takes great patience to undertake to do any public good. For the world must remain Master Smart and must always bridle the horse under the tail, play the master to everybody and yet know nothing itself. That is the world's way which it cannot give up....

And to come back to the point, if your Papist has too much to say about the word *sola*, "alone," tell him promptly this: Dr. Martin Luther wishes it thus and says that Papist and donkey are the same to him. *Sic volo, sic jubeo, sit pro ratione voluntas*. For we do not claim to be pupils and disciples of the Papists, but their masters and judges; we also will strut for once and brag among the donkeys; and as Paul boasts among his crazy saints, so will I boast to my donkeys. They are doctors? So am I. They are learned? So am I. They are preachers? So am I. They are theologists? So am I. They are debaters? So am I. They are philosophers? So

am I. They are dialecticians? So am I. They are commentators? So am I. They write books? So do I....

But for you and our friends I will say why I meant to use the word *sola*, although in Romans iii. 28 I have used not *sola* but *solum* or *tantum*. So cunningly do the donkeys examine my text; and yet I have used it elsewhere, *sola fide*, and insist upon both *sola* and *solum*. I have labored in translating to give a pure and clear German. And it befell us often that we sought and asked after a single word for a fortnight, yea for three and four weeks and even then we did not find it sometimes.

On Job we labored so, Magister Philippus (Melanchthon), Aurogallus and I, that in four days we sometimes scarcely disposed of three lines. But now that it is translated and done, my dear fellow, every one can read and master it, and one will run over three or four pages without stumbling once, and is not aware of the lumps and stumps that once lay where now he goes as smoothly as over a planed board, and where we had to sweat and worry to get these lumps and stumps out of the way in order that people might walk there so smoothly. It is easy to plow when the field is cleared, but no one is eager to root out the wood and the stumps and prepare the field. One must not expect to win thanks of the world. Even God himself can win no thanks with sun, earth and sky, nay, not even with the death of his own son. Then let it be and remain the world in the Devil's name, since it will not otherwise.

I knew very well that here in Romans, iii. 28 the word *solum* is not in either the Greek or the Latin text, and I needed no Papists to tell me. It is true, these four letters *sola* are not there, and the donkeys look at the letters as a cow does at a new gate. But they do not see that the meaning of the text calls for it, and if one is to give the clear and vigorous German of it, that it must be there. For I was after talking German, and not Latin or Greek, since I had determined to talk German in my translation. Now this is the manner of our German speech, that when one is talking of two things, one of which is affirmed and the other denied, we use the word *allein*, "alone" or "only" along with the word "not" or "no." As when we say: The peasant brings corn alone and no money. Or, No, I have indeed no money now, but only corn. Or, I have eaten only and not yet drunken. Or, Hast thou written only and not yet read it over. And endless other such phrases in daily use.

In all these phrases, although the Latin or the Greek language does not, nevertheless the German language does, and it is its nature, put in the word *allein*, in order that the word "not" or "no" may

be thus fuller and clearer. For although I may say also, "The peasant brings corn and no money," yet the phrase "no money" does not sound as full and clear as when I say, "The peasant brings corn alone and no money," and in this case the word "alone" helps the word "no" so that it becomes a full and Germanly clear phrase.

For one must not ask the letters in the Latin language how one should talk German, as these donkeys do; but one should ask the mother in the house, the children on the street, the common man in the market, must watch their mouths to see how they talk, and translate accordingly. Then they will understand it and realize that we are talking German with them.

For instance, when Christ says, Matt. xii. 34: *Ex abundantia cordis os loquitur*. If I were to follow these donkeys they would set the letters before me and translate thus: "Out of the superfluity of the heart speaketh the mouth." [*Aus dem Ueberfluss des Herzens redet der Mund.*] Tell me, is that Germanly spoken? What German will understand such speech? What sort of thing is "superfluity of the heart"? No German can say that unless he meant to say that some one had too large a heart or too much heart. And even then it is not quite right. For "superfluity of the heart" is no German, as little as these phrases are German: "Superfluity of house," "superfluity of stove," "superfluity of bench." But thus speaketh the mother in the house and the common man in the street: "Of what the heart is full, thereof the mouth runs over." [*Wes das Herz voll ist, des gehet der Mund über.*] That is spoken in good German. And this I have striven for, and, alas! not always hit and attained. For the Latin letters are an extraordinary hindrance to speaking good German.

Or again, when the traitor Judas says, Matt. xxvi. 8: *Ut quid perditio hacc?* and in Mark xiv. 4: *Ut quid perditio ista unguenti facta est?* if I follow the donkeys and literalists I must translate it thus: "Why has this losing of the ointment occurred?" But what sort of German is that? What German speaks thus, "Losing of the ointment occurred"? And even if he understands it, he thinks the ointment has been lost and he must hunt for it, although even that sounds vague and uncertain still. Now if this is good German why do they not come forward and make us a fine, pretty, new German Testament and let Luther's Testament alone? Forsooth, I think they would bring their knowledge to light. But the German man speaks thus: *Ut quid* etc., "Why this unthrif [Unrath—a now obsolete word]," or "Why such waste?" or "It's a pity for the ointment!" That is good German, from which one understands that Magdalena

had been unthrifty with the ointment she had poured out and had caused a waste; that was the opinion of Judas, for he intended to handle it with more thrift.

Again, when the angel greets Mary and says, "Greeted be thou, Mary, full of grace, the Lord be with thee!" Well, thus has it been translated hitherto simply according to the Latin letters. But tell me, whether this is also good German. Where does a German speak thus: "Thou art full of grace"? And what German understands what is meant by "full of grace" [*voll Gnaden*]? He must think of a cask full of beer or a purse full of money. Therefore I translated it, "Thou gracious one" [*Holdselige*, sweet one]; so that a German can add so much more in thought of what the angel means by his greeting. But here the Papists are wild against me because I have spoiled the angelic greeting, though I have not even yet hit upon the best German. And if I had taken here the best German and translated the greeting: "God greet thee, thou dear Mary" (for this is what the angel means, and thus he would have spoken if he had had to greet her in German) I think they would have gone and hanged themselves for sheer devotion to dear Mary because I had so misused the greeting.

But they do not need to give answer or account for my translation. Thou hearest well I choose to say, "Thou gracious Mary," "Thou dear Mary," and let them say, "Thou full of grace Mary." Whoever knows German, knows what a heartfelt fine word that is: "The dear Mary," "the dear God," "the dear emperor," "the dear prince," "the dear man," "the dear child." And I do not know whether the word "dear" [*lieb*] can be given in such a heartfelt and satisfying way in Latin or any other language, so that it wells and thrills into the heart through all the senses as it does in our language.

For I judge that St. Luke, being a master in Hebrew and Greek, intended to hit and clearly reproduce the Hebrew word that the angel used with the Greek *κεχαριτωμένη*. And I imagine that the angel Gabriel talked with Mary as he talked with Daniel, calling him *דָּאִי־בְנֵי־אֱלֹהִים* and *אִישׁ־דִּבְרֵי־חַיִּים*, *vir desideriorum*, that is, "thou dear Daniel." For this is Gabriel's style of address, as we read in the Book of Daniel. If now I were to give this according to the letter in German, according to the donkeys' art, I must needs say: "Daniel, thou man of desires," or "Thou man of longings." Ah, but that would be fine German! A German hears indeed that longings and desires (*Lüste*, *Begierungen*) are German words, though they are not absolutely pure German words, and *Lust* and *Begier* would be better. But when

they are thus put together, "Thou man of longings," no German knows what is meant, and thinks perhaps that Daniel is full of base desires. And that would be a fine translation!

Therefore I must let the letters go in this case and ask how the German says what the Hebrew expresses by *אֵלֶיךָ יְיָ אֱלֹהֵי*, and I find that the German says, "Thou dear Daniel," "thou dear Mary," or "thou gracious maid," or "thou maidlike virgin," "thou tender woman," and the like. For he who undertakes to translate must have a great store of words so that he can have his choice if one does not sound right in every place.

And why should I say much or at length of translation? If I were to indicate the source and idea of all my words I should have to write at it for a year. What skill and labor are required in translating, I have surely experienced; therefore I do not propose to take for judge or critic in the matter any Papal donkey or mule who has never tried it. Whoever does not like my translation may let it alone; the Devil thank him who does not like it or who criticizes it without my wit and will. If it is to be criticized, I wish to do it myself; and if I do not do it myself, will others please leave my translation in peace and let every one do what he pleases on his own account, and have a good year.

This I can testify with good conscience, that I have applied my highest truth and zeal to the matter and have never cherished false intentions. For I have never taken nor sought nor profited a farthing from my work, nor did I seek my own glory in it, as God, my Lord, knows, but I did it as a service for my dear Christians and in honor of one who sits above, who does so much good for me every hour, that if I had translated a thousand times as much and as industriously, yet I should not have earned the right to live an hour nor to have a sound eye. . . .

Yet, on the other hand, I have not always allowed the letters to slip away too freely, but gave heed to them most carefully, both I and my assistants, so that if much depended on a passage I kept it according to the letter and did not pass over it so freely. For instance, John vi. 27, where Christ says: "Him God the Father hath sealed." Here it would probably have been better in German: "Him God the Father hath marked," or: "Him God the Father hath intended." But here I thought better to slight the German language than to depart from the word. Ah, translating is not everybody's art,—as the foolish saints think; the work demands a right pious, faithful, reverent, Christian, experienced, disciplined heart. Therefore I hold that no false Christian nor factionist can translate faith-

fully. As is clearly illustrated in the version of the Prophets issued at Worms, on which indeed great industry was expended, and which is far behind my German version. But there were Jews engaged on it who did not show great regard for Christ, though but for this there were skill and industry enough employed. And let this much be said of translating and of the nature of language.

But furthermore, I have not only trusted to the nature of language and followed it, in adding to Romans iii. 28 *solum*, "alone," but the text and the intention of St. Paul absolutely demand and compel it. [Then follows some exposition of Scripture to this effect.]

Now since the nature of the subject itself demands that we say, "Faith alone justifieth," and also the nature of our German tongue, which also teaches us to express it in this way, and since I have besides the examples of the holy fathers and am constrained by the danger that people may cling altogether to works and fail of the faith and lose Christ, especially at this time when they have been so long accustomed to the doctrine of works and are to be weaned from it only with great effort, therefore it is not only right but also highly necessary, that we speak out most distinctly and completely: Faith alone without works maketh righteous. And I regret that I did not add to it, "any" and "of any," that is, "without any works of any laws," that it might be uttered fully and squarely. Therefore it shall stay in my New Testament and not even if all the Papal donkeys should go foolish and crazy shall they get me to change it.

[The pamphlet then proceeds to discuss briefly the second question, whether the departed saints intercede for us.]